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### JACQUES DERRIDA'S RELIGION WITH/OUT RELIGION AND THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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# JACQUES DERRIDA'S RELIGION WITH/OUT RELIGION AND THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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## ***Abstract***

This article aims at rethinking religious education from an engagement with Derrida's forms of reasoning and analyzing. In the first section Gert Biesta presents deconstruction and shows how we can find deconstruction in education. In the second section Siebren Miedema explores the religious horizon of deconstruction. In the final section the authors outline possible implications for religious education.

## **INTRODUCTION: DECONSTRUCTION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CONVERSATION**

Over the past years we both have been reading the work of Jacques Derrida. Gert Biesta especially has been interested in the ethico-political potential of Derrida's writings and in the ways in which deconstruction can help us to see and "do" education differently (see, e.g., Biesta 2001a, 2001b, in press; Biesta and Egéa-Kuehne 2001). Siebren Miedema found it more difficult to understand what the philosophical and practical bearings of Derrida's writings for him as an educator might be. His "entrance" into the meaning of deconstruction came through Derrida's work on religion (most notably Derrida 1995), and through such books as Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and De Vries's *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Caputo 1997b; De Vries 1999). He became aware of the apocalyptic, versus just apophatic or kataphatic, forms of religiosity and the messianic tones of religiosity in Derrida's work (see below).

In this article we engage in a conversation about deconstruction and religious education in order to present the yield of our shared learning process, which aims at rethinking religious

education from an engagement with Derrida's forms of reasoning and analyzing. In the first section Gert Biesta presents deconstruction and shows how we can find deconstruction in education. In the second section Siebren Miedema explores the religious horizon of deconstruction. In the final section we outline possible implications for religious education.

## GERT BIESTA: DECONSTRUCTION AND EDUCATION

The work of Jacques Derrida and "his philosophy" of "deconstruction" has often been the target of fierce criticisms. Deconstruction repeatedly has been depicted as a form of critical analysis that aims at tearing apart everything it finds on its way. It has been characterized as a form of textualization with hyperrelativistic and nihilistic implications. Deconstruction, so the argument goes, is ethically void, politically impotent, and utterly dangerous (see e.g., Habermas 1988).

These allegations, however, seriously miss the point of deconstruction. Deconstruction—if, for the moment, we can use this word as a shorthand for Derrida's ideas—is *not* a skeptical or relativistic position (it is not even "a" position), but has a clear ethico-political *horizon* (Bernstein 1992). In its shortest and most general formula the ethico-political horizon of deconstruction can be described as a concern for the other or, to be more precise, a concern for the *otherness* of the other. Rather than being destructive, negative, or "an enclosure in nothingness" (Derrida 1984, 24) deconstruction is fundamentally *affirmative*. The deconstructive affirmation of the otherness of the other is not straightforwardly affirmative. It is not simply an affirmation of what already exists and, for that reason, can be identified and known. Deconstruction entails an affirmation of what is *wholly* other. It is an affirmation of what is unforeseeable from the present, of what is "beyond the horizon of the same" (Caputo 1997a, 42). It is an affirmation of an otherness that, in a sense, is always to come, as an event which "as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth" (Derrida 1992, 27). More, therefore, than simply being an openness toward the other, deconstruction is an openness toward the unforeseeable in-coming (*l'invention*; invention) of the other. As Caputo has suggested, deconstruction might therefore best be thought of as a certain "inventionalism" (1997a, 42). In some places Derrida refers to this unforeseeable event of the in-coming of the other as "the impossible." It is crucial to see that the impossible does not refer to what

is *not* possible but to that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility (Derrida 1992, 16). In other places he refers to this as “the incalculable,” that which exceeds programs, rules and calculations (see e.g., Derrida 1997, 17–8; Biesta 2001b).

One way to understand the “idea” of deconstruction is to see it in relation to the critique of philosophical foundationalism. Derrida sees the history of Western philosophy as a continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground, a fixed center, and Archimedean point, which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a center from which everything originating from it can be mastered and controlled (see Derrida 1978, 279). Since Plato this origin has always been defined in terms of *presence*. The origin is thought of as fully present and as self-sufficient—as simply “there” in and for itself. Any attempt to present something as original, fundamental, and self-sufficient is an example of what Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida 1978, 281). “It could be shown, that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always been designated *an invariable presence*—*eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (Derrida 1978, 279–80). On the one hand, Derrida wants to be critical of the metaphysics of presence, that is, of all thinking which claims to know and to be able to identify what is original, fundamental, and ultimate. But Derrida does not simply want to reject the metaphysics of presence. He does not simply want to become antifoundational, because to claim with certainty that there are *no* foundations is in a sense as arrogant as to claim with certainty that there are. The predicament, as Derrida puts it, is that we “can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Derrida 1978, 280). There is, in other words, “no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics” (280). While Derrida wants to “shake” metaphysics, he acknowledges—unlike the antifoundationalists—that there is no neutral or innocent place “outside” of metaphysics from which this can be done. What is more to the point, to put it simply, is to say that Derrida wants to shake metaphysics by showing that metaphysics is itself always already “shaking;” by showing, in other words, the impossibility of any of its attempts to fix or immobilize being through the presentation of a self-sufficient presence.

One way in which Derrida tries to show this, is by revealing that any presentation of a self-sufficient, self-identical presence can only

be done with the help of something which is excluded by this very presence. He attempts to show, in other words, that presence can not be present in itself, but needs the “help” of what is not present, of what is absent. It is here that the idea of deconstruction comes into play, but it is important to see what it is and what it is not. Deconstruction is *not* the activity of revealing the impossibility of metaphysics. Deconstruction is not something that philosophers can “do”; it is “not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (Derrida 1991, 273). Deconstruction rather refers to the constant “oscillation” between metaphysics and its undoing. Derrida explains that “‘deconstructions,’ which I prefer to say in the plural . . . is one of the possible names to designate . . . what occurs . . . or cannot manage to occur . . . namely a certain dislocation, which in effect reiterates itself regularly—and wherever there is something rather than nothing” (Derrida and Ewald 2001, 67). What deconstruction tries to hint at, is that in order for something to be present, something else has to be absent. But if this is so—and this is the crucial insight offered by Derrida—then it means that what is absent cannot simply be made present. We cannot simply know or name what is absent. We can only assume or suspect that there is something else and we can open ourselves for the in-coming, for the invention of what—or who—is other. We cannot do more than this—and according to Derrida we shouldn’t do anything less.

Along these lines Derrida presents us with a critique of metaphysics which doesn’t claim that we can and should do without metaphysics, but which rather wants to make us sensitive for the fact that there is always something more, something beyond what is present, certain, visible, obvious, etcetera. Rather than trying to get rid of all metaphysics—which would leave us without the possibility to say anything at all—Derrida is looking for “openings”—moments, places, events, occurrences where metaphysics reveals that it cannot simply and straightforwardly exist. Where do we find openings in metaphysics? Where is metaphysics opening itself? It is, among other things, in those situations where what is possible turns out to be sustained by its impossibility; where what is possible, or occurs or happens, instead of being wiped out by its impossibility is actually nourished and fed by it (see Caputo 1997a, 32). It is in this curious interplay between conditions of possibility and conditions of impossibility that deconstruction occurs and metaphysics opens itself.

Deconstruction is therefore not an analytical technique, a way of reading or interpretation. Deconstruction rather has to be understood *in its occurrence*. What is at stake in the occurrence of deconstruction

is an attempt to bring into view the impossibility to totalize, the impossibility to articulate a self-sufficient, self-present center from which everything can be mastered and controlled. Deconstruction reveals that every inside has a constitutive outside which is not merely external but always in a sense already inhabits the inside, so that the self-sufficiency or self-presence can only be brought about by an act of exclusion. What gives deconstruction its motive and drive, is precisely its concern to do justice to what is excluded.

At first sight, all these ideas may sound very abstract and remote from any real-life concern. But I believe that they are of immense importance for education and educators, and so in a very practical way.

The first link between deconstruction and education can be found in the fact that the process of education, the interaction between teachers and students, is characterized by a deconstructive “logic” (cf. Biesta 2001a). If we ask the question how education is possible—if, in other words, we ask for the conditions of possibility of education—we have to concede that education is only possible because of the fact that there are children, students, learners who give meaning and respond to what parents and teachers do and say. Education is not a one-way process, where educators simply fill the minds of their students. Education is only possible because the “recipients” of education actively *make sense* of what is being offered. Some would argue that ideally teachers should have 100 percent control over and should ultimately determine what learners learn. This, however, would negate and ultimately eradicate the very existence and singularity, the very uniqueness of the learner. It would make education into a technology, into a process of production where the aim would simply be the production of identical “outputs.” This not only reveals that the very thing that makes education possible (the existence of learners who respond in their own, unique and singular ways) is also what makes education impossible (in the sense of education as a form of total control, as a form of production). It reveals, in other words, that the condition of possibility of education is at the same time its condition of impossibility. The more important conclusion is that an acknowledgment of the deconstructive nature of education precisely creates an “opening” for unique, individual beings to “come into the world” (see Biesta forthcoming). When we would negate the deconstructive nature of education, and would aim to make education into a technique, we would precisely forfeit the possibility for children and students to come into the world as unique, singular beings, rather than as interchangeable units. This is why the

impossibility of education—the impossibility to conceive of education as something that can be calculated, and where its outcome can simply be foreseen—is so very important for education, if, that is, we believe that education should be concerned with the opportunities for unique individual beings to come into the world.

The second educational lesson that can be learnt from deconstruction has to do with the way in which we, educators, relate to the otherness of learners, children, and students. How can we do justice to them as others, how can we do justice to their otherness? This question goes to the very heart of the matter, not in the least because of Derrida's claim that ultimately deconstruction is justice (Derrida 1992; Biesta in press). For Derrida, justice is always directed to the other; it is, as he has once put it, nothing more and nothing less than "the relation to the other." Saying, therefore, that something is just, or that one is just, is a betrayal of the very idea of justice to the extent to which it forecloses the possibility for the other to decide whether justice has indeed been rendered. If justice is a concern for the other as other, for the otherness of the other, for an otherness that, by definition, we can neither foresee nor totalize, if justice, in short, always addresses itself to the *singularity* of the other (Derrida 1992, 20), we are obliged to keep the unforeseen possibility of the in-coming of the other, the surprise of the invention of the other open (see Derrida 1989).

But this doesn't mean that there is nothing to do or that nothing should be done. It may seem as if Derrida is advocating that the only way to really do justice to the otherness of the other, to the other as singular being, is to leave the other completely alone. Any intervention, any attempt to name or define the other, to let the other in on our terms, could be seen as a violation of the otherness of the other. But it is not difficult to see that if we would leave the other alone, we would precisely block the very possibility for him or her to come into the world. This would be utterly unjust. The educational predicament, therefore, is that we—we educators—should engage with the other, which we can only do through talking, naming, identifying, etcetera. We need, in other words, to recognize the other; yet such a recognition is always also a misrecognition and for that reason we could say that it is an act of violence. Derrida refers to this violence as "transcendental violence" in order to express that the violence of interfering in the lives of our students is the very condition of possibility (and hence at the same time the condition of impossibility) for them to come into the world. To be concerned and to take responsibility for the coming into the world of our students as unique, singular beings is the ultimate



task, the ultimate vocation of educators. Yet, what we can learn from Derrida is that this task is not something that is straightforward, it is not something that can simply be “done.” At the very heart of any education that doesn’t want to be *unjust*, we find an aporia. It is this aporia with which educators have to reckon.

Just education—if such a thing exists—has to be on the outlook for the impossible invention of the other. The other, Derrida writes, “is not the possible.” The other is “precisely what is not invented” (Derrida 1989, 59–60). This means that “deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilising foreclosureary structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other” (59–60). But one should not forget that one does not make the other come. One lets it come by *preparing* for its coming, by preparing for what is incalculable (see Biesta 2001b).

### SIEBREN MIEDEMA: THE RELIGIOUS HORIZON OF DECONSTRUCTION

When my doctoral dissertation was published as a book (Miedema 1986), I received a letter from a Dutch professor emeritus—Brus—who suggested that it might be interesting for me to read Derrida—in case I should not already have done so—because of the content of his work and the direction I had chosen in my book and given the results of my research project.

Recently I reread that letter. Brus posed the question whether the results of my reconstruction of a recent part of history of the educational sciences vis-à-vis the theory–practice debate and my collapsing efforts to develop a harmonious and fully integrated relationship did not show that this theoretical exercise was itself an anomaly. A debate impossible to conclude with a saving formula and not solvable with/in words, because it is not contained in the possibilities of theory to finalize this tension. Could it be, Brus asked me, that time and again we need to tackle this problem creatively and “solve” it on the level of action and perception? Just now I really understand what he is talking about, and even get the point: This is a plea for deconstruction. Caputo has so aptly formulated what deconstruction means.

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable

missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come. Every time you try to stabilize the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away. (Caputo 1997a, 31)

I don't remember which article by Derrida I read at that time, but I still remember that I could not get a grip on the text, and stopped reading Derrida. And although Gert and I already had been working and publishing together since 1987, and theoretically have a lot in common, I really could not understand his growing enthusiasm for Derrida's ideas since the mid-nineties. But his enthusiasm intrigued me and kept me occupied, reinforced by the question "How does one explain the differences we have in our views on education?"

It was not until 2000 that I got back to Derrida's work. This time the explicit and definite entrance was religion. Due to my long-lasting interest in and reading of mystical texts, learning that Derrida's essay "Sauf le nom" (Derrida 1995, 33–85) dealt with the German poet-mystic Angelus Silesius and with negative theology, made me curious to read this text. This happened, and now the penny finally dropped. We decided to join forces over the issue of "Derrida & Religious Education."

In "Sauf le nom" Derrida is engaged in a dialogue with Angelus Silesius's (Johannes Scheffler 1624–77) *Cherubinic Wanderer*. His choice to use the form of dialogue is not incidental because in the very beginning of his text Derrida states:

I would like to speak to you, don't hesitate to interrupt me, of this multiplicity of voices, of this quite initial, but indeterminable as well, end of monologism—and of what follows . . . (Derrida 1995, 35)

The end of monologism, is to stop with any dogmatic self-confident plea, and the abolition of any private "possession" of the truth. The interruptions of the speaker in the text are not destructive and negative, but function instead as critical additions. As if both speakers together represent the endless openness of the truth and the infinite necessity to strive and search for it (see Sneller 1998, 11–2). This necessity of polyphonic speaking about God opens up a beautiful pedagogical perspective as well.

Derrida is fascinated by Silesius's radical search for the alterity, the total otherness of God or—as Silesius sometimes denotes it—the Godhead. For Silesius this means leaving behind all knowledge,

thoughts, stories, theologies, words, and even the names related to Him. Even leaving behind and distancing oneself from the search for God. “Go there where you cannot; see where you do not see; Hear where nothing rings or sounds, so are you where God speaks” (Silesius in Derrida 1995, 44). Related to the name of God, Derrida states:

Now the hyperbolic movements in the Platonic, Plotinian, or Neoplatonic style will not only precipitate beyond being or God insofar as he is (the supreme being [*étant*]), but beyond God even as name, as naming, named, or nameable, insofar as reference is made there to some thing. The name itself seems sometimes to be there no longer save [...]. The name itself seems sometimes to be no longer there, save [*sauf*, safe]. (Derrida 1995, 65)

Silesius wants to free himself from speaking about God in the *kataphatic* mode. He does not want to speak about God in a fully positive and affirmative way, for example by pointing out the goodness of God or the power of God. Further, Silesius also wants to free himself from a kataphatic affirmation in terms of theologies of Christianity. His search can be interpreted as deconstruction, the concern for the openness toward the otherness of God, as the impossible, that is, the “one” who cannot be foreseen as possibility, the incalculable, the unpredictable, and the “one” who cannot be completely filled in. The alterity of God drives every human search, without ever finding the concrete locus in a particular religious tradition, a philosophical or theological system or in this man or this group in such a way that we can say “Here is the otherness or the alterity of God.” However, this coming of the otherness of God is for Derrida the potential or the source for ethics and morals, and for every religious and philosophical hope. Here Derrida uses the terms messianic or messianicity (but without messianism).

This [messianicity] would be the opening to the future or the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only merge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death—and radical evil—can come as surprise at any moment [...]. The messianic exposes itself to absolute surprise and, even if it takes the phenomenal form of peace or of justice, it ought, exposing itself so abstractly, be prepared (waiting without awaiting itself) for the best as for the worst, the one never coming without opening the possibility of the other. At issue there is a ‘general structure of experience.’ (Derrida 1998, 17–8)

What does Derrida mean with the expression “sauf le nom”? Is it his contention that we also give up the name of God? In a sense the name

of God is also always a chance, an openness and a possibility of the impossible. But it is not an *es*se, an essentialist entity. So, the name does not refer to a fixed thing, but is standing for an arrival, a coming, and for an event [*événement*, *venir*].

To lose the name is quite simple to respect it: as name. That is to say, to pronounce it, which comes down to traversing it toward the other, the other whom it names and who bears it. To pronounce it without pronouncing it. To forget it by calling it, by recalling it (to oneself), which comes down to calling or recalling the other ... (Derrida 1995, 58)

Saving the name can prepare us—and only that—for the unforeseeable in-coming (invention) of the otherness of God. With such an inventionalist view of the in-coming of the alterity of God, essentialist and conventionalist approaches respectively in favor of unchanging essences and ageless traditions (see Caputo 1997a, 42) are no longer adequate.

I do not want to deal here with the extensive debate on “Derrida and negative theology,” but just briefly argue that because of the affirmative character of this deconstructive “reading” of religion and religiosity, this way of thinking can simply not be characterized as “negative theology” or as *apophatic*, that is, as an approach exclusively in the negative mode. If deconstruction is the affirmation of what is *wholly* other [*tout autre*], it is precisely the tranquillity of a fully positive or a fully negative theological approach that the deconstruction of religion disturbs. Or to put it differently: It is precisely deconstruction that opens up the possibility of a religiosity that is neither positive/present not negative/absent but appears in the very moment of the occurrence of deconstruction.

To conclude this section I like to refer to Sneller’s convincing argument that Genesis 32:22–31 in several respects offers us a/the key to Derrida’s “sauf le nom.” Among medieval mystics this story was a favorite, because it points to the unnameable nameable.

And he [Jacob] arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that he did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.” But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!” So He said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called

Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.

## IN CONVERSATION: THE GIFT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

There is an important parallel between our two texts, because they suggest that both education and religion can "use" deconstruction to prevent them from sliding back into a technological approach which aims to possess and control the o/Other (the child, the student, the learner; God). Deconstruction also makes clear, however, that if we want to avoid the possession of and the control over the other, we should not leave the other, the otherness of the o/Other to h/Her or h/His own device. Within the domains of education and religion we have the duty and the responsibility to speak, to name, to give a name. To be silent here is the ultimate form of injustice. The space that opens itself in deconstruction precisely lies in between the will to govern (possession, technology, control) and a complete lack of interest (not to speak, not to name, no recognition, no acknowledgement, no answers, no reaction). This space is not a kind of compromise, nor just a bit of both; it exists precisely as undecidability, as aporia.

The parallel between a deconstructive approach to education and a deconstructive understanding of religion implies that there is a double challenge for religious education. Deconstruction urges us to think both about the educational and the religious dimension of religious education along deconstructive lines. It is not that we can leave education as it is, and only present a different approach to religion; nor that we can leave religion as it is within a deconstructive educational framework. The two dimensions meet in the idea of the *impossible*, in that both in education and religion deconstruction urges us to prepare for the impossible, unforeseeable manifestation of the o/Other. In religious education we not only prepare ourselves as educators for the impossible invention, the incalculable coming into the world of the singularity of our students. At the very same time we need to prepare our students for the impossible coming into the world, the incalculable manifestation of the Other. This is not something that we can simply do in a positive way. It is not something that we can organize

or arrange in advance, because we do not know how and when the incoming of the o/Other will happen, who it will be, and how the o/Other will speak and act.

This does not mean that we should not do anything at all—on the contrary. What we can and should do, is at least to try to avoid those situations which clearly block the manifestation of the o/Other. One thing that is likely to impede the manifestation of the o/Other, is if we would define the aim of religious education as the making or production of religious persons. Deconstruction reminds us that education is not a technology. It rather is about creating opportunities for children, students, learners to *respond* (Biesta 2003), to take a stance, positively or negatively, toward religious practices and rites, religious doctrines and narratives, religious traditions, and religious visions (Miedema 2000, 2003). We come into the world through our unique and singular responses—not as a result of what others tell us we should be. This further means that the aim of religious education should also not be to make our students into members of particular religious institutions or organizations, or to make them adherents of the religion of their parents and teachers. This is not only a problem because it would, again, try to determine the terms under which children, students, learners are “allowed” to come into the world. It is also a problem, because it would assume that we can know, for once and (literally) for all what it is that religion is “about” and what it has to say to us. It would deny, in other words, the *otherness* of the Other. What should happen instead, first of all, is that children, students, learners are supported in making their own choices on the basis of a real understanding of and real participation in religious practices, rituals, and traditions. This may awaken a *religious sensitivity*, that is, an openness toward the secrets of life, an openness towards the otherness of the o/Other, an openness for the total Other. It is important to stress that participation in religious practices and traditions is only one way in which religious sensitivity may be awakened—but it is not necessarily or exclusively within what we would recognize as religious contexts and settings that religious sensitivity may emerge. This is not only because, educationally, we can never fully determine where and how this sensitivity may emerge. But it is also, theologically, because it is not for us to say when, where and how the Other will disclose and manifest him/herself, when, where and how the Other will come into the world. This is why religious educators should develop their own sensitivity for the many, unpredictable and unprecedented ways

in which their students may manifest their own emerging religious sensitivity.

This also has implications for the way in which we think about the role of subject-matter in religious education. What would seriously impede the invention of the child, student, learner is to think of the subject-matter of religious education as something that has to be transmitted, and hence has to be appropriated and mastered—if not simply swallowed—by the learner. Jackson (1986) has characterized this as the mimetic view of education—from the Greek *mimesis*: imitation, copying—because it sees the imitation of what is presented by the teacher as the ultimate aim of education. But for education to happen, as we have seen, we not only need the “input” from the side of the teacher; we also need the response from the side of the learner. It is only through this response, through interpretation, through making personal meaning out of the subject matter presented, that meaning emerges and education becomes a possibility (see Miedema and Biesta 2003, 90). This is a process in which the whole person is involved, not only her or his cognition, but also her or his feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, volitions, habits, dispositions and actions. The outcome of this, as Jackson writes, is “a transformation of one kind or another in the person being taught—a qualitative change often of dramatic proportion, a metamorphosis, so to speak” (1986, 120–1).

The question deconstruction therefore raises for religious educators is about how to create an “opening” in which the o/Other can speak to the student, and in which the student can speak, can respond to the o/Other, to the otherness of the o/Other. Religious educators are not the technicians of this process. They rather take up a responsibility for the unpredictable ways in which students come into the world and for the unpredictable ways in which they will—or will not—respond to the gift of religion. It will be clear that this responsibility is itself in a sense impossible, in that it cannot be foreseen for whom one actually takes responsibility. This always lies in the future. In this respect, religious educators are also in a situation in which they take responsibility for an otherness that can never become fully present.

Are there any existing practices that may resemble some of what we have been writing about? Practices that offer opportunities for an awakening of religious sensitivity? On the one hand our answer to this question may simply be to say that there is no situation in which this might *not* happen—and there are many stories of those who have encountered the Other in the most unlikely circumstances. In this respect we can only urge our readers to exercise their sensitivity, to look

around and allow themselves to be surprised about the many unpredictable and unprecedented ways in which the o/Other may become manifest in the lives of young people.

On the other hand, there are indeed practices which come closer to realizing an openness and welcoming towards young people than others, and we should name them as examples. One practice we want to mention is the Taizé Community, founded by Brother Roger Schutz in the village of Taizé in France (see Miedema 2003). Each year thousands of young people from all over the world come to Taizé to join the Brothers in their action and contemplation. Taizé is characterized by both an openness and a clear identity. Everybody is welcome and one may come and leave as one likes. The community itself, however, has a clear identity, a firm and structured setting based on explicit rules and sustained in great unanimity and sincerity by the Brothers. This is what they offer—something with a clear identity, a clear “name”—and with it comes the invitation for young people to take part, to respond, to express themselves, to sing, discuss, pray and reflect. The Brothers, so we could say, create opportunities for encounter with no strings attached. Taizé offers hospitality, openness and inclusivity. It offers an invitation for everyone to discover in every human beings “the mystery of the hidden presence of God” (Schutz 1967, 41). Through this Taizé offers one possible way through which young people—but also many adults—may experience the impossible gift of religion, the unforeseeable manifestation of the Other.

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